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INFO RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI IMMEDIATE 1627
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RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 0527
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE 0664
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA IMMEDIATE 0616
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PESHAWAR 000463

SIPDIS

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TAGS: TER MOPS PGOV PK

SUBJECT: SECURITY FORCES -- MAKING PROGRESS AGAINST MILITANTS IN BAJAUR?

REF: A) PESHAWAR 409 B) PESHAWAR 394

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Peshawar, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (a), (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Pakistan Army contacts told post on September 16 that they have cleared eastern Bajaur of militants, dismantled their command and control center there, and now control a crucial 20 km stretch of the main road extending to Khar. Bajaur is a critical part of an east-west swathe of territory that, according to local observers, stretches from Kashmir to Afghanistan's Kunar province, including Swat district and Mohmand Agency. The east-west link has served as a conduit for militants to launch cross-border raids in Afghanistan. Although local contacts are hopeful that the Bajaur operation will continue until militants throughout the agency are soundly beaten, joint civil-military planning remains a concept rather than a reality, hampering opportunities for holding onto the gains that the Pakistani military appears to have made in recent weeks. End Summary.

Ground Operations in Bajaur

¶2. (C) On September 9, Pakistan Army and paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) backed by gunship helicopters launched a combined ground operation against militants in Bajaur Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The ground campaign followed more than three weeks of artillery and helicopter gunship attacks. According to information provided to ODRP Peshawar, an additional 11th Corps Brigade has been deployed to support the operation. (Note: A Pakistan Brigade consists of approximately 3000 soldiers. End note).

Goals and Plans

¶3. (C) The military operation has three primary goals and five stages according to an 11th Corps briefing provided to Post's military liaison officer. The goals are "to restore the traditional writ of the Government in Bajaur Agency, break the

linkages between various miscreant groups and eliminate militants." The five stages consist of: build up, clear Torghundai-Khar road; build up at Khar and open the road between Khar and Inayat Qila; clear road between Khar and Nawagai; and link up Kit Kot and Nawa Pass positions. (Comment: The operation appears to be in the third phase or build up at Khar. End comment.)

¶4. (C) Both Pakistan military and civilian contacts claim that the Bajaur operation has killed over 800 militants during the operation so far. Unconfirmed reports indicate that some of the dead militants are Arabs or other foreigners.

Bajaur's Significance for Militants

¶5. (C) Bajaur, according to local observers, is the command and control hub for anti-Coalition operations across the border in northeastern Afghanistan. Pakistan's air strikes targeted homes used by local taliban commander Maulvi Faqir Mohammad. Despite reports of Faqir's death, he appears to have escaped unharmed by the bombing campaign thus far. On September 7, Faqir reportedly vowed to continue "jihad" against America and its allies, and warned the government to stop the military operation in Bajaur and other parts of the tribal region.

Volunteer Militias are Confronting the Militants

¶6. (C) The Salarzai tribe in southwestern Bajaur recently formed lashkars, volunteer militias, to openly confront the militants in their area north of Khar. The lashkar, whose strength has been estimated by various contacts from hundreds to thousands, have burned down homes that sheltered militants and have promised to accompany Pakistan's security forces on their patrols.

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¶7. (C) FATA Secretariat Additional Chief Secretary Habibullah Khan emphasized to PO on September 15 concerns about militants crossing over from Afghanistan into Bajaur. While community leaders in Bajaur's western Salarzai tehsil have risen up against militants, those in Mahmund tehsil (the heart of the militants stronghold), he said, are sitting on the fence and gauging the likely winner in this battle. Reinforcements from Afghanistan are giving heart to the militants in Mahmund. As long as community elders in Mahmund, the ACS explained, see local militants willing and able to put up a good fight, prospects that the tribes will turn on the militants goes down.

IDPs from Bajaur a Continuing Challenge

¶7. (C) Bajaur residents continue to move back and forth out of the province as military operations allow. Some Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) are staying with relatives, some have used camps and others remaining in other metro areas. Bajaur Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Shaukat Ullah told Emboffs on Sept. 12 that many residents remained outside the province, some as far away as Rawalpindi and Karachi. Of the IDPs who had returned to Bajaur, Shaukat predicted that they would again leave Bajaur within days, filling up the closed camps. He said that both IDPs and host families were suffering, but agreed it was difficult to find a way to reach the people inside Bajaur with humanitarian supplies. Shaukat expected that the Pakistani Army would manage to pacify main population centers in a few days, and that residents would return to their homes around the time of Eid. Consulate contacts estimate that over 200,000 fled Bajaur to escape the fighting. Many of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved to Peshawar, Dir, Malakand, Mardan and Rawalpindi to live with relatives or friends. Under Pashtun cultural norms, IDPs tend to shun relief camps and instead opt to stay with friends and family, who are themselves poor and have difficulty supporting such guests.

¶8. (C) Bajaur Agency consists of seven subdivisions, known as tehsils. The fighting has been concentrated in the three tehsils west of Khar -- Nawagai, Mahmund, and Salarzai. Most towns and villages in these three western tehsils are reportedly still largely empty. The government has imposed a 24-hour curfew and blocked the roads. Post contacts who reside in Bajaur believe it could be months before they can return home to western Bajaur, placing a strain on the resources of the families and communities where they have sought refuge.

¶9. (C) On September 1, Pakistan's military suspended operations against local taliban militants in Bajaur in honor of Ramadan. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) spokesman, Maulvi Omar, welcomed the announcement but said militants would not lay down arms. Qadir told post that the announcement of a Ramadan ceasefire was for "public consumption" as the government never intended to halt operations. The Pakistan announcement caused some confusion among IDPs who were unsure if it was safe to return to their homes. Most IDPs have not returned home.

Comment

¶10. (C) While it remains to be seen if the military will complete all five phases of the Bajaur operation, joint civil-military planning is still a concept rather than a reality, undermining the prospects for holding onto the gains that the Pakistani military hopes to make as the operation proceeds.

¶11. (C) While some post contacts see the development of lashkars and this operation as positive signs, it will take a lot more of both before we could conclude that results from this operation will be significantly different than other recent operations in Hangu (ref A) and Khyber (ref B).

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